

TOWN OF BOLIVAR  
Refractories Company Town  
Bolivar  
Westmoreland County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5977

HABS  
PA  
65-BOLIV,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
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Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF BOLIVAR  
Refractories Company Town

HABS No. PA-5977

Location: Near State Highway 259, Westmoreland County,  
Pennsylvania

Established: 1829

Brickyard  
established: ca. 1842, closed 1979

Company houses  
built: ca. 1905

Significance: Bolivar was the site of one of the earliest refractory brick works in the state of Pennsylvania. At least five separate brick works operated near Bolivar and Robinson (HABS No. PA-5975), on the opposite bank of the Conemaugh River, during the later nineteenth century. The Garfield Company, in Bolivar, was distinctive within the refractories industry in the region because it continued to operate as an independent, family-run business throughout its history and was never merged with one of the national refractories companies.

Project  
Information: The results of the study of refractory brickyards and towns was published in 1993: Kim E. Wallace, Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service).

The contents of this publication were transmitted to the Library of Congress in report form. See additional information on the refractories industry under HABS No. PA-5973, Refractories Company Towns, Mt. Union, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania. Research notes, field photos and copies of historic photos collected during the project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection, Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

## Introduction

Bolivar was the site of one of the earliest refractory brick works in the state of Pennsylvania. At least five separate brick works operated near Bolivar and Robinson (HABS No. PA-5975), on the opposite bank of the Conemaugh River, during the later nineteenth century. The Reese-Hammond Fire Brick Company, incorporated in 1898, controlled the local brickyards at the turn of the century and was responsible for the development of Bolivar in this period. In 1902 the company, controlled by the Hammond family, sponsored two additions to the town. After the company was sold at sheriff's sale in 1909, the Garfield Fire Clay Company, founded in 1887 by Elliot Robinson and sons, became the local leader in refractories production. The Garfield Company was distinctive within the refractories industry in the region because it continued to operate as an independent, family-run business throughout its history and was never merged with one of the national refractories companies. Robinson's descendants ran the company until the last brickyard was closed in 1979.

## History

Garfield Refractories Company, with an office in Bolivar in northeastern Westmoreland County, remained independent of national companies throughout the twentieth century. Its last operating brickyard was in Robinson, across the Conemaugh River in southern Indiana County. When it closed in 1979, it was still run by descendants of Elliot Robinson, an area native who opened a brickyard in the 1850s. An abundance of fire clay, coal for firing, and access to transportation made Bolivar and Robinson a prime site for brick making; at least five separate brickyards operated there for many years. The first, sited along the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal at Bolivar in the 1840s, was one of the earliest in the state, apparently predated only by a brickyard in Philadelphia and one at Queen's Run in Clinton County.<sup>1</sup>

Because of their place in the early history of the industry, one might expect the development of the Bolivar brickyards to reflect local family initiative and control, while those founded later, in the era of mergers and incorporations, were more likely to become subsidiary interests of outside investors. In fact, the early history of these brickyards seems to typify the industry

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur F. Greaves-Walker, "History of Development of the Refractories Industry in the United States," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society (June 1941), 214. Corinne Azen Krause, Refractories: The Hidden Industry, A History of Refractories in the United States, 1860-1985 (Pittsburgh: American Ceramic Society, 1987), 6-7.

and business practices in general during this period in the involvement of a number of changing partnerships whose members were both resident and non-resident.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the century, joint ownership gave way to control by two local families: the Hammonds lived in Bolivar, the Robinsons in both Bolivar and Robinson.

The village of Bolivar, situated along the Conemaugh River in the mountains of northeastern Westmoreland County, was established in 1829 by canal builders. By 1832 it boasted a store, post office, forge, and twenty houses.<sup>3</sup> Several canal-era buildings still stand along the main thoroughfare. Scottish immigrant James Glover is credited with initiating the local firebrick business. He reportedly worked in the Mt. Savage, Maryland, clay mines before discovering the deposits at Bolivar in 1842. Township tax assessors recorded a brickyard in Fairfield Township in 1846 when Baxter, Glover, Harley and Company were taxed for 250 acres, one sawmill, four horses, and one "fire brick factory." Five years later the partnership was reformulated as Glover and Kier and Company. Samuel M. Kier was a western Pennsylvania entrepreneur who later began a brickworks in Salina. In 1851 he and Glover were operating two "brickworks" at Bolivar and by 1856 had built fourteen tenant houses for their employees.<sup>4</sup> In the 1850s Elliott Robinson and C. A. R. Benney opened a third plant; in 1865 Thomas Boyd was proprietor of a fourth. By 1875 James Gardner and Brothers was operating a fifth in the neighboring village of Lockport.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the number of plant sites and frequently shifting partnerships and name changes it is sometimes unclear which plants failed and which were taken over by new companies. Further confusion arises because the companies' holdings often straddled the Conemaugh River and fell in two counties' and at least three municipalities' tax assessment jurisdictions.

The county atlases for the period provide a slightly different slate of partners than do local histories and tax records, confirming the large number of people who invested in brick making. The 1867 atlas showed James Gardner's brickyard at

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<sup>2</sup>Alfred Chandler, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 36-37.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas F. Gordon, A Gazetteer of the State of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: T. Belknap, 1832), .

<sup>4</sup>"Early Days of Fire-Brick Manufacture," Clay Record 25 (September 15, 1904), 28-29. Tax assessment records, Fairfield Township, Westmoreland County.

<sup>5</sup>Tax assessment records, Fairfield Township and Bolivar, Westmoreland County. "Brick Yards" in Cunningham, "History of Bolivar."

Lockport as Wilson and Gardner Fire Brick Works and listed two firebrick manufacturers at Bolivar--A. J. Libengood and Boyd, McCartney, and Marrow. The 1876 atlas showed two brickyards in Lockport--one owned by A. Robertson, the other by Hammond and Company. At Bolivar in 1876 there were four brickyards owned by J. E. McCartney; J. Brenizer and Company; Miller, Coulter, and Dushane; and the Enterprise Manufacturing Company. The Enterprise Company's yard was taken over by the McFeely Brick Company, based in Latrobe. It maintained the Bolivar property into the 1930s, extending the role of small-scale local business networks into the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

Elliott Robinson sold his first brickyard to Libengood and Boyd in 1862. A few years later it was purchased by James Hammond, then employed as its superintendent, and his brother Thomas, who were Irish immigrants. In the 1870s they were joined by partners John McMath and Isaac and B. F. Reese. McMath and the Reeses pioneered brickmaking in Clearfield County when they built a brickyard at Woodland in the late 1860s. Their Bolivar investment was incorporated as the Reese-Hammond Fire Brick Company in 1898. By 1900 it operated four brickyards in Bolivar and Robinson and had interests in the Curwensville Fire Brick Company in Clearfield County and in the Hammond Fire Brick Company in Fairmont, West Virginia. In addition to refractories, it manufactured paving brick, face brick, and enameled brick.<sup>7</sup>

James Hammond's son, James Brett "J. B." Hammond, took over the Reese-Hammond Company in the 1890s. He graduated from Indiana State Normal School in 1887, and began work as a teacher. He moved on to keep accounts for Reese-Hammond, managed the company store for two years, then became salesman for the firebrick department. Thus groomed for a position of leadership, he was assigned the office of treasurer and general manager when the company was incorporated in 1898. He expanded the family's involvement in Pennsylvania brickworks, founded the Kentucky Fire Brick Company in 1906, and invested in other companies with plants in Ohio, Alabama, and Georgia, and served as an officer in several national brick trade organizations. In 1913, he consolidated two of his local plants, the Bolivar Face Brick and the Phoenix Fire Brick companies, with the Joseph Soisson Fire Brick Company based in Connellsville, Fayette County.

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<sup>6</sup>"Bolivar" and "Lockport" in S. N. and D. G. Beers, Atlas of Westmoreland County, Pa. (Philadelphia: A. Pomeroy, 1867); and in F. A. Davis and H. L. Kochersperger, Illustrated Atlas of Westmoreland County, Pa. (Reading, Pa.: Reading Publishing House, 1876). Tax assessment records, Bolivar and Fairfield Township, Westmoreland County; West Wheatfield Township, Indiana County.

<sup>7</sup>The Manufactories and Manufacturers of Pennsylvania of the Nineteenth Century (Philadelphia: Galaxy Publishers, 1875), 271. Stevenson, III:298. Cunningham, "Brick Yards" in "History of Bolivar." Clearfield Sesqui-Centennial 1954, souvenir program, 44.

In 1914 Hammond attempted to launch a national political career from this strong business base. He was a Progressive, Prohibitionist candidate for Congress but lost by 400 votes. He did serve two terms as a state representative and as representative to the state and national conventions of the Republican and Progressive parties. On the local level Hammond seems to have been involved in virtually all the important municipal, business, and fraternal organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The Hammond family played a literally and figuratively formative role in Bolivar's development. In 1882 a local historian wrote that "the chief business interest in the place is the production and manufacture of firebrick from deposits of fire clay which lie next the Conemaugh River." By the late 1890s J. B. Hammond oversaw five of the local brickyards. As the principle property owners and overseers of Bolivar's prosperity, in early 1902 the Hammonds had two plans drafted for the town's expansion along Walnut, Lincoln, and McKinley streets--one plan was named for and apparently sponsored by the Reese-Hammond Fire Brick Company, the other by William McClure Hammond.<sup>9</sup>

The company built a variety of houses along the new streets. In 1905 the Reese-Hammond Fire Brick Company was assessed for ten houses and three vacant lots on Lincoln Street, twenty-one houses and twelve vacant lots on McKinley Street, and ten houses on Walnut Street.<sup>10</sup> It is not clear whether this property was treated strictly as company housing and rented only to company employees. Although many of the houses are still standing, they do not help clarify the question. While houses on some portions of the streets look like company housing--alternating rows of two utilitarian, wood-frame house forms--other sections have more substantial high-style house forms with brick and shingle siding. Yet, like company houses, these were also built from only a few basic plans placed alternately along the street. Several of these houses were known as homes of members of the Hammond family.

At the turn of the century Bolivar's economic future seemed assured and other new construction--a bank, an opera house, a large hotel and department store and a municipal central heating system--was initiated. A panic in 1902 curbed expansion, caused

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<sup>8</sup>"James Brett Hammond" and "Brickyards" in Cunningham, "History of Bolivar."

<sup>9</sup>S. A. Taylor, Plan of Lots for Reese Hammond Fire Brick Company Bolivar Westmoreland County, March 1900, recorded Feb. 24, 1902. S. A. Taylor, Plan of Lots for W. Mc. Hammond Bolivar Westmoreland County Pa., recorded Feb. 14, 1902.

<sup>10</sup>Tax assessment records, Bolivar, Westmoreland County.

a bank failure, and pushed several brickyards towards bankruptcy. Reese-Hammond's No. 1 Works burned in the same year, and apparently the company did not recover intact. It was sold at sheriff's sale in 1909, and some of the manufacturing properties were taken over by Garfield Fire Clay Company. Others continued to operate, coming under the Joseph Soisson Company name after 1913.<sup>11</sup>

After 1910, part of the company's residential properties were assessed to J. B. Hammond, "trustee," and the remainder to the William M. Hammond estate. From 1920 to 1950 the latter properties were assessed to W. B. Hammond, "merchant." After 1955 they came under the holdings of Garfield Refractories.<sup>12</sup>

The houses and lots entrusted to J. B. Hammond were transferred to the Bolivar Realty Company--J. B. Hammond, President; C. W. Hammond, Secretary. In 1913 the local newspaper noted that the Realty Company was making excavations for four six-room houses on the south side of McKinley Street. In 1918 Bolivar Realty's holdings were sold to the Fairfield Coal and Coke Company (later renamed Bolivar Coal and Coke), a transfer reflecting the growing importance of coal mining in the local economy. The houses and lots were owned by the coal company until 1950 and so figure in local residents' memories as coal company rather than brick company houses.<sup>13</sup>

Garfield Refractories was still the largest area employer in 1940 and drew employees from Robinson, Bolivar, and West Bolivar. Glenn Garland, a resident of West Bolivar, started work in the brickyard's sandstone quarry in that year and stayed with the company until it closed in 1979. He was familiar with the spectrum of work in the plant and witnessed the effects of mechanization and the decline of the industry. While working in shipping and loading, he ran one of the plant's first tow motors and estimated that it reduced the amount of time to load a boxcar by a third. But the plant's long, rectangular kilns, each with an 80,000-brick capacity, still took six men with a tow motor three to four days to unload.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>"The Golden Era of Bolivar," "Bolivar National Bank," "Bolivar Opera House," and Mrs. F. B. Gibson, "History of Bolivar" in Cunningham, "History of Bolivar." Tax assessment records, Bolivar, Westmoreland County.

<sup>12</sup>Tax assessment records, Bolivar, Westmoreland County.

<sup>13</sup>Gibson, "History of Bolivar," in Cunningham, "History of Bolivar." Tax assessment records, Bolivar, Westmoreland County.

<sup>14</sup>Glenn Garland, interview by author, West Bolivar, Pa., September 25, 1991.

About 165 men worked at the brickyard in 1940. Using a stiff-mud machine, two dry presses, and some hand molders, they made refractories for a variety of customers, including Johnstown's Bethlehem Steel, and coke oven installations in Connellsville, Johnstown, and Watertown, N.Y. After World War II orders for coke oven brick fell off, followed before long by those for furnace brick. In the plant's later years automation reduced the workforce to about sixty. Its owners sought to keep the facilities and products up-to-date. They sponsored research in the new refractory forms of castables and specialties, and as the importance of railroad shipping declined in the 1960s, they invested in a truck fleet to make faster deliveries.<sup>15</sup>

As part of its diversification efforts, Garfield Refractories purchased the Patton Clay Manufacturing Company in northern Cambria County in 1967. The Patton community was famous for brick making, especially for its "Patton Pavers," used to pave streets and plazas across the U.S. and in Europe. Although some refractories were made there, the works specialized in clay pipe and building and paving bricks. The Patton works closed in 1960, and Garfield planned to reestablish clay pipe production, introduce clay pigeons for skeet shooting and, more improbably, to inaugurate a line of pizza, spaghetti, potato chips, and pretzels. The reopening was unsuccessful, as was the Garfield company's diversification. The Robinson works closed in 1979 and was demolished in the late 1980s. A sewage treatment plant now occupies the site. The Patton plant was razed in 1981 to make way for senior citizen housing and a mini-mall.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Garland interview. Johnstown Tribune-Democrat: Harry M. Emerick, "Bolivar Firm 121 Years Old," (January 22, 1965); Harry Emerick, "Garfield Refractories' Backlog Grows," (January 20, 1967); Harry Emerick, "Garfield Refractories Plans Diversification," (January 26, 1968).

<sup>16</sup>Johnstown Tribune-Democrat: "Patton Clay Plant Is Sold," (July 21, 1967); "Patton Refractories Workmen Operating a Steam Press," (January 26, 1968); "Patton Project on Tap," (December 31, 1981); John J. Como, "Clay Plant Fading," (June 21, 1981); "Ground Broken For Patton Projects," (January 8, 1983). Richard Quinn, Indiana County, Pennsylvania: Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites (Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, 1992), .